

**TOWN OF SALEM
SPECIAL TOWN MEETING
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2023 – 6:00 P.M.
SALEM SCHOOL MULTI-PURPOSE ROOM**

CALL TO ORDER

First Selectman Ed Chmielewski called the meeting to order at 6:03 p.m. and stated the purpose of the meeting.

The Special Town Meeting is being held, pursuant to Chapter 4 of the Salem Town Charter, to discuss the following items, as stated on the submitted petition:

- To publicly discuss the results of the Emergency Services Study being done by Municipal Resources, Inc. (MRI), as soon as it is completed
- To discuss the current status and future direction of the Emergency Services in the Town of Salem

Per an e-mail received from MRI, the Study, which is not yet complete, will include recommendations for strengthening the Town's Public Safety Services and addressing the immediate needs and long-term goals. Once completed, their findings will be presented to the public at a future Board of Selectmen meeting. Per Section 4.04(B)(5) of the Salem Town Charter, the Special Town Meeting was called "within thirty calendar days of the certification of said petition,...." As such, the Board of Selectmen did not have any option to delay the Town Meeting until the completion of the Study.

He stated that there would be no motions or questions during the meeting. He also reminded the public to behave in a kind and civil manner and limit their comments to three minutes. Speakers may not yield their time to another individual.

ELECTION OF MODERATOR

M/S/C: Marshall Collins/John Bernier, to elect Vernon Smith as the Moderator for the Special Town Meeting. Discussion: None. Voice vote, all in favor.

Moderator Smith reiterated the rules, stating that all comments will have a three-minute limit, as monitored by Mr. Bernier. Speakers may not yield their time and may speak a second time after all of the members of the public have had the opportunity to speak. Understanding the existing friction surrounding the subject matter, he requested the public maintain their civility and focus. Similar to a Public Hearing, there will be no conversation(s) surrounding the comments, questions, or concerns that are expressed.

Town Clerk Linda Flugrad recited the Warning and Public Notice for the Special Town Meeting.

PUBLIC COMMENTS

Cheryl Philopena, 309 Witch Meadow Road, questioned the Board of Selectmen's cancellation of the 2006 Emergency Services Agreement on September 1, 2020. Though the public was repeatedly informed that a revised Agreement was in process, it has yet to come to fruition. Gardner Lake Volunteer Fire Company (GLVFCO) Chief Peter Silva and herself, as the President of the GLVFCO Board of Directors, met with the then-First Selectman Kevin Lyden who presented a revised Agreement, which she found to be "absolutely perfect" for both the Fire Company and the Town of Salem. Unfortunately, the revised Agreement was never ratified. While she was willing to discuss and eliminate part(s) of the lawsuit to resolve their issues, she was not willing to drop the entire lawsuit against the town in exchange for the ratification of the Agreement. She has served as an EMT (Emergency Medical Technician) for the Town of Salem for the past 48 years and is appalled by what has transpired in the town for their Emergency Services. She questioned why the original Agreement was canceled and why the revised Agreement was not ratified — a question that she posed to the then-Board of Selectmen to no avail. She is also appalled by the treatment of the GLVFCO and felt that the public should be made aware of its issues which have negatively affected their ability to obtain volunteers. She stated that she has made several verbal and written requests to engage in a discussion regarding the issues and has been repeatedly refused.

Salem Property Owner Horace Lindo, 542 Flanders Road, Oakdale, questioned when the Study would be completed, its purpose, and when it will be presented to the residents of the town.

Cheryl Philopena, 309 Witch Meadow Road, informed the residents that, due to the town's refusal to sit down and discuss the issues, they have wasted approximately \$150,000.00 of their tax dollars fighting the First Responders who give their time to the community responding to emergency calls in the middle of the night. She stated that the Fire Company has utilized part of its ambulance funds to fight the lawsuit. She admitted that, after researching the original issue pertaining to a disagreement regarding the FLSA (Federal Labor Standards Act) laws, she discovered that the Fire Company was violating labor laws by providing both stipends and hourly wages to their weekend volunteers. Her repeated attempts to bring the matter to the attention of the Town Attorney and Board of Selectmen were ignored. As a result, the Fire Company remedied the issue on its own by providing stipends, eliminating the hourly wages, and submitting a monthly invoice to the town. After nine (9) months of service without pay, a lawsuit was filed. The stipends, meanwhile, were paid through funds that are maintained for public use. She reported that approximately \$292,000.00 is currently in the ambulance fund, \$50,000.00 of which was used for the purchase of a new stretcher, plus legal fees. She felt that the issues should have been resolved years ago and reiterated her question to the First Selectman as to why there is no Emergency Services Agreement and why they have expended an exorbitant amount of the taxpayers' money for the lawsuit.

Janet Schultz, 370 Old Colchester Road, began reciting an article she received in the mail.

She was interrupted by Moderator Smith, who stated that the article being recited derives from election material he had helped draft. He questioned its relevancy and warned her against making any personal attacks.

Maryanne Casciano, 99 Morgan Road, who has been a resident of the town since 2000, expressed her appreciation to and applauded all of the emergency services personnel who serve the town during the middle of the night to respond to calls, adding that they provide a service that she is neither trained for nor interested in serving, herself. She understood the delicacy of the matters that have been long in existence and felt that, as a community, we should all work together. She believed that all parties lose in the case of a lawsuit and there are three sides to a story: one side, the opposing side, and the middle (actual) side. As a citizen, she expressed her support for the Study, which is being conducted by a third-party and would provide the middle, objective viewpoint or perspective that may serve to resolve their issues in a timely fashion.

Shane Elliot, 156 Gungy Road, stated that volunteers are always being sought, and should any members of the public be interested in becoming trained and volunteering and serving the public, to speak with the relevant party(ies).

First Selectman Chmielewski, as a retired First Responder, expressed his appreciation and wished to recognize and applaud the town's First Responders for all they do to keep the town safe. He provided a brief update on the status of the town's Emergency Services and Emergency Management Departments. Two-and-a-half years ago, a monthly Chiefs Roundtable Meeting with the town and Gardner Lake and Salem Volunteer Fire Company Chiefs, Deputy Chiefs, and Assistant Chiefs was instituted. The meeting has been attended by one of the Fire Companies approximately 80-90% of the time. The purpose of the meetings was to extend and enhance the communication between the town's Full-Time and Volunteer Firefighters/EMTs. The Emergency Management Team is comprised of the Director and four (4) experienced members, including a Department of Corrections Emergency Management Captain, Connecticut State Police Lieutenant, Firefighter Lieutenant, and Board of Finance Liaison. The Fire Marshal's office is currently comprised of the Fire Marshal, several Deputy Fire Marshals, and a Fire Investigator. The Department recently formalized a Regional Mutual Aid Agreement with the surrounding towns, enhancing the town's services. Emergency Services include two (2) paid full-time Firefighters/EMTs, two (2) paid part-time Firefighter/EMT Supervisors, and two (2) Volunteer Fire Companies. The Salem Volunteer Fire Company (SVFCO) is comprised of volunteer Firefighters/EMTs and Fire Police. The property and building that houses the Fire Company were donated to the town several years ago and the town pays for its utilities, maintenance, emergency vehicles, etc. The GLVFCO is comprised of volunteer Firefighters/EMTs, Fire Police, and a compensated ambulance crew. All of the emergency vehicles are owned by the Town of Salem, with the exception of the ambulance. The town pays

for the gas and maintenance of all of the vehicles, including the ambulance, which is currently 10-1/2 years of age. The property and the building are owned by the Fire Company. The intention of the Board of Selectman is to continue to provide quality emergency services to the town and its residents within its financial constraints. The purpose of the Study is to provide recommendations for areas in which the town could improve. Depending upon its feasibility, these recommendations will be implemented to maintain the safety of the town and its residents.

Moderator Smith questioned the Study's estimated date of completion.

First Selectman Chmielewski stated that there is no estimated date of completion. The ultimate goal is to have a quality, comprehensive study that reflects the needs of the town.

John Cunningham, 46 Salem Ridge Drive, has been a resident of the town and served as a member of the GLVFCO since 1973 and has held numerous positions within the Fire Company. He recommended the public visit the town website and view the Board of Finance Meeting Minutes, which states that the Board was pleased to receive a promised completion date of the Study of February 3 by the First Selectman as the timely receipt of the Study could be used to support the defunding of the Fire Company. He questioned whether the goal was to have an impartial, objective Study or whether something more sinister was in play. He felt that there were too many secrets within the town. He stated that he had raised the existence of questionable practices to the Boards of Selectmen and Finance and had yet to receive a response from either of the Boards or its members. Such small matters could eventually grow into major issues of fraud, corruption, or coercion.

Carl Nawrocki, 9 Music Vale Road, questioned whether the Study's findings would help resolve the impasse between the GLVFCO and the Board of Selectmen.

Cheryl Philopena, 309 Witch Meadow Road, felt that the First Selectman failed to provide any "real answers". She reported that former Fire Marshal Donald Bourdeau, Jr., retired from his position in April 2022 and continues to be listed as the Fire Marshal on the State of Connecticut website. Following his retirement, the position was posted and two (2) qualified candidates applied for the position. Oddly, after several months, an Acting Fire Marshal, who does not reside in the Town of Salem, was appointed to the position. She confirmed that the GLVFCO owns the building and the utilities and some of the maintenance is paid for by the townspeople. She stated that the bulk of the maintenance costs is paid for by the Fire Company. In addition, the hall is offered for use, free of charge, to its residents for funeral receptions, Recreation Commission activities, the Unsung Heroes Banquet, Boating Classes, Fire Marshal Classes, Building Official Classes, the Lions Club, and the like. She requested that the Board of Finance re-review their Capital Request for the repaving of the parking lot, which has become a safety hazard to both the public and its members. She questioned why the town continues to be without a Fire Marshal and reiterated her question regarding the lack of an Emergency Services Contract – a question that continues to remain unanswered.

Gaylene Smith, 46 Salem Ridge Drive, who has resided in the town since 1983, has witnessed the town's Emergency Services grow over the years and is appalled by its recent transformations. This evening's meeting has reaffirmed her decision not to become involved in politics. As a retired Paramedic and State Instructor, she encouraged everyone to volunteer for rescue services. She is proud of her service to the town. She stated that her husband worked with former Fire Marshal Bourdeau for several years as the Deputy Fire Marshal and continues to hold office hours twice a week. She expressed her unhappiness and dismay, feeling that most of the townspeople are unaware of the issues. She commended the emergency personnel of both Fire Companies, who are very well-trained and professional. She encouraged everyone to ask questions because they are not receiving all of the answers.

Salem Property Owner Horace Lindo, 542 Flanders Road, Oakdale, requested a simple commitment from the Board of Selectmen to hold a Town Meeting when the Study is completed.

Moderator Smith stated that, once the Study is completed, the plan is to hold an Informational Town Meeting to discuss the findings.

Cheryl Philopena, 309 Witch Meadow Road, informed the public that, rather than sitting down and discussing their issues to eliminate the lawsuit, the town has opted to countersue the Fire Company for the misuse of its ambulance funds. As a result of the countersuit, the trial date for the original lawsuit of June 2023 was rescheduled to December 2023. She asked the residents to pressure the town to discuss the following issues: the Ratification of the Emergency Services Contract, the negotiation of the money owed, and the autonomy of the GLVFCO. She felt that the lawsuits were a waste of resources, energy, taxpayers' money, and ambulance funds for issues that could be resolved simply.

Joe Ploszaj, 33 Rattlesnake Ledge Road, who was born and raised in the town, reminisced about the old days and expressed his disgust and strong dismay. He stated that, until recently, Emergency Services always came first as it is they who save their lives or fight the fires.

ADJOURNMENT

M/S/C: Marshall Collins/ Joe Ploszaj, to adjourn the meeting at 6:49 p.m. Discussion: None. Voice vote, all in favor. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted by:

Agnes T. Miyuki, Recording Secretary for the Town of Salem